

Star

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Few things pack up and disappear so quickly as the Christmas spirit. After what seems like months of preparation, for many people the point of Christmas seems to evaporate after any unwanted presents have been recycled, the last remnants of the turkey have been transformed into a final dish, and the pine needles have been swept from the floor. Few, if any, celebrate the traditional Twelve Days of Christmas now, losing that gradual sense of unwrapping the Divine Mystery that is the Incarnation. The gift of the Christ-Child is not only for Christmas; He is for the whole of the year. Jesus is God's outrageous gift of generosity Who has come to address the chasm that yawns between the Divine and the human. Jesus is the bridge of hope and redemption across Whom we move from despair to hope, from emptiness to fulfilment and from darkness to light. Jesus, Word made flesh, the physical presence of God, takes us from the reality of the incarnation to the unfolding realisation of Who and what God is and does as we approach Epiphany. Apart from God's inspiration and engagement, humanity would have remained stuck in a place far from hope and far from heaven.

The reality of human helplessness and hopelessness can only be transformed by the unshakeable presence of the living God. When the novelty of secular festivities fades, the celebration of God's inventive appearance and reappearance in the history and experience of humanity shines an inextinguishable light into the darkest of days.

Somewhere on the road from Persia, modern day Iran, men were on the road. We say there were three because of the number of gifts they were bearing: gold, frankincense and myrrh, but the Bible does not number them. We know they were more than one. We know they were wise men, but do not know that they were kings, though their gifts were worth a king's ransom. They followed a star.

There is a lot of scholastic debate about the star. Was it Halley's Comet? Did it have a supernatural meaning? Was it a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn? Was it a

Supernova when a star explodes and gives off enormous light for weeks or months? Did it happen at all?

Matthew in his gospel might simply mean this: the star is what leads human beings to encounter Jesus, God's Son. The star gives direction. The star gives light. "It is not this! It is no this! It is not this! It IS THIS!"

The star leads to Judea, to Bethlehem. The star goes ahead. The star leads through danger, and beyond it. The star illuminates the new-born Saviour. The star shows the wise ones paying homage, their first gift. Then gold, worthy of a king and when spent a sign of good deeds being done; frankincense, worthy of a divinity, a sign of prayers rising upwards; and myrrh, the spice of burial, a sign of suffering and sacrifice. With the appearance of the star it is as if the very heavens proclaim the significance of this new birth. The star, symbol of direction and knowledge; the star, symbol of God's light and revelation. But its light, we are invited to see Jesus, and to worship Him. After the brightness of the leading star, there is no suggestion that the wise men followed the star home. "I want to suggest that the star faded. The significance of the fading star is that in the first part of the journey, the magi needed a sign, a wonder, a revelation, a guidepost, a traffic-light, a tracking device, a SatNav. They did not know where they were going and needed the external presence of the star. The star led the to the child, and when they saw the child, the no longer needed the star, because the function of the star was to bring them to the point of divine revelation."ⁱ They were brought to see God, and they saw God.

Once you see God, then you do not need the star; because the external power of the star goes internal. Once they saw the child their hearts lit up and their memory would be forever illuminated by the One they had seen and worshipped. They would never forget what they had seen. The star faded because it had completed its task. But the wise men had only begun theirs, the power of God revealing Himself to them transformed their lives. We are told in Luke's Gospel of the shepherds, having seen the infant in the manger, running home to tell everyone the good news they had seen. I have no difficulty in seeing the wise men returning to their home, sharing the wonder of that moment. Something had happened, and they would never be the same again. The

light of the star no longer shone outside, it shone from the inside. A birth of hope, often battered, but a birth nonetheless, had taken place. God's hope. The star led to it. Those who have seen it should tell of it for the rest of their lives.

The birthing of the world comes in and through God's activity. This birthing idea is brought to us again at Christmas in the birth of Jesus, delivered into the midst of our world. It is another gateway to reflect upon on this first Sunday of a New Year. Even the numbering of this New Year, 2020, entices us to wonder about vision. To have 2020 vision is to have clarity or sharpness of vision. Responding to the Word of God, the person of Jesus and the words of the Bible will help us look more clearly at our world past, present and future.

It is hard to read this story and not to think about the ongoing events in the Middle East. Iran and Iraq are likely starting points for the Wise Men, for these were the places East of the Holy Land where the tradition of Magi and astrologers was strong. It is hard to wonder about that troubled place, where innocents are still killed, along with the guilty; where tyrants rule and foreign powers seek to subjugate; where state-sponsored assassinations take place on every side, and innocent people live in terror, wondering what will happen to them next. As the war-mongers in Tehran, and the White House strut and position themselves on the world stage with their threats and their counter threats; many wonder where wisdom and cool heads and common sense is to be found. Many wonder what hope can be found in a land where it is not the feet of running shepherds, but booted soldiers that can be heard. Many wonder what hope can be found in a land where the storm-clouds are low, and the sun and moon and stars are blotted from the sky. Many wonder what hope can be found when the song of the angels is drowned out by the sound of gunfire.

And yet, we are led by a star. And we find ourselves our knees in a house in Bethlehem, watching gifts of prophecy being handed over. Gold for a king. Incense for prayer. Myrrh for a death. And we see the star overhead fade. And we know the infant in the crib will soon be a refugee. And we know He will return to Galilee, and teach, and heal, and listen, and challenge. And we know He will face trouble in His life. And we know He will be killed by the political and religious leaders of His day. And we know, when the star has faded, and the darkness descends, and the world is left

in tears and ashes, that somehow, the power of this person, this baby, this man, this hope, will be enough to roll away the stone, and pierce the darkness, and lift the gloom, and keep the promise, and be Emmanuel. God with us.

Whether in a crib in Bethlehem, or on a cross at Calvary. Whether in the fire-blackened regions of Australia, or the war-fearing countries of the Middle East. Whether in the food banks or the cancer wards, or the darkened rooms of modern day slaves, or the sweatshops of Asia, or the quietly grieving homes where loved ones are gone, or the broken homes of broken relationships, or the places where redundancy is feared, or the rooms where old age and infirmity encroaches, or the minds of the depressed, or the workplaces of the over-burdened. Jesus was all promise. The star led people. The star still leads people. And then it fades, and then we, who have been led, find the star-light within us. And through our words and our actions, hope, despite everything. **DESPITE EVERYTHING**, still shines out. See the star, follow it, wonder, worship, then turn, and enter the world, and tell the story of undimming hope.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Frank A Thomas, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1, pps 214-216